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The use of information by the long-term settled Irish population in London

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The Irish in Britain are a well established community. This study focuses on the circumstances and experiences of members of a long term settled group who arrived in the 1950s and 1960s. Social structures and networks have developed to meet the personal and cultural needs of the community. Informal and personal communication plays a strong role in providing for information needs and these link into networks provided by churches, cultural associations, local authorities and the voluntary sector. The experiences of the group have determined their behaviours and preferences. Overall, their experiences form part of the pattern of aging and act as a challenge to resourcing future needs.

Keywords | Irish diaspora; Irish in Britain; Irish in London; migrant labour; user community; information seeking behaviour; elderly populations

Background

Ireland has always experienced emigration, but it grew rapidly after the failure of the potato crop in the 1840s. This has continued steadily ever since with a boost in the ten years after 1945 (Fitzpatrick, 1989). Modern commentators refer to this as the 'Irish diaspora' which consists of Irish emigrants and their descendants in countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil and states of the Caribbean and continental Europe. The diaspora maximally interpreted, contains over 80 million people, which is over thirteen times the population of the island of Ireland now (estimated 6.2 million in 2009).

In order to settle and survive in a new environment, the Irish needed to access information. Over time the information needs of the Irish have changed, particularly for the elderly immigrants who form the basis of this study.

All the major British urban cities experienced some form of Irish migration with Liverpool and Glasgow becoming two cities with large Irish populations. As the capital city and the historic focal point of the whole British Empire, London also experienced large-scale migration of Irish people. The Borough of Camden and the East End were settled in the interwar years as many Irishmen worked on

the railways and in the docks. More large-scale migration from Ireland came in the 1950s exploiting the post-war rebuilding and general improvement in economic conditions in the UK. The population of the Irish Republic fell every year during the 1950s. It is impossible to make a precise estimate due to the fluidity of movement between Ireland and UK but according to Cowley (2001) who used national insurance number registrations as basis of estimate in 1955, 48,000 people left Ireland; by 1957 it had risen to 58,000. The larger part of this migration was directly to Britain because of proximity and the pull of an established Irish community. It impacted on all large major cities such as Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham and especially London. In the latter there was a large concentration of Irish in Kilburn, Cricklewood and Camden, as well as considerable communities of Irish in Hammersmith, Fulham, Acton, Holloway and Paddington.

Irish migrants tended to go to live in areas of existing immigrant concentrations. Poverty and racism went hand in hand and these conditions led to a degree of self reliance. The historical relationship between the UK and Ireland also added to this uneasy relationship and this deteriorated in the late 1960s when the political situation in Northern Ireland worsened. With their Roman Catholic faith as one of the defining factors of their identity there was

tension with the largely Protestant north. This sense of community served as bonding and as more migrants arrived from Ireland they used family contacts as a first point of contact. The fact that the Irish tended to work, socialise and intermarry with each other also strengthened the idea of a home away from home.

Another burst of emigration came in the 1980s: immigrants were educated to a better standard and the traditional sense of identity was less important. This led to some changes in outlook in the traditional centres of the Irish community. Families also moved towards the suburbs of London and some went back to Ireland as the Irish economy began to pick up in the late 1990s. According to the 2001 census there were 675,000 people in England identifying themselves as “white Irish” (about 1 % of the population).

Now, the age profile of the Irish community is an older one. The percentage of Irish people aged 50 years and over (at 51.5 %) is higher than for the white British population as a whole (35.2 %) and for non-white minorities (14.5 %) (MIND website, 2010). Women also outnumber men due to a longer average life expectancy and a better lifestyle. As Age Concern (1998) point out in their report, older people from ethnic minorities face double discrimination due to age and race. Ethnic minority people require more support to cope with poor health and low income and are faced with racial discrimination. Norman (1985) goes further and explains that migrants experience “a triple jeopardy scenario” due to old age, a tendency to live in physical and socially challenging circumstances of inner urban areas, as well as suffering cultural and/or racial discrimination which can lead to communication difficulties in housing, health and social care (Tilki, 2003; Tilki et al., 2009).

The elderly Irish face challenges as a group and their information needs must not be overlooked. The communication and delivery of such services must be culturally sensitive to maximise effect. Thus their experiences on arriving to this country, their way of life and interaction with other groups and organisations are a basic factor in understanding their information needs.

Twenty people from the Irish community were interviewed using mainly semi-structured face-to-face interview techniques. Two groups were studied: one consisting of fifteen people, all long-term migrants living in London; the other comprised five who were involved in information activities. Two of the five had done

extensive studies into the health of the Irish population in London. A range of organisations that provide services for these migrants were studied along with a review of the information that these organisations generate.

An information audit of the Irish organisations involved with elderly migrants

Organisations of first contact for migrants:

On arrival, migrants would have been totally perplexed by the bright lights of London. While many, but by no means all, had some friends or family members to rely on, these people could not meet all the initial information requirements. The Catholic Church was one of the first groups to recognise the needs of the Irish migrant in Britain. It was familiar and has a tradition of social support. In 1920 the Catholic population of Britain stood at two million and by 1970 it had almost reached five million. While some of this increase can be attributed to post-war migration from places such as Poland and Italy, the majority of this increase was from Ireland. The church authorities were quick to act when large-scale post-war migration commenced. Led primarily by the Archbishop of Dublin John Charles Mc Quaid, The Irish chaplaincy scheme was initiated. The idea of the scheme was for church authorities to keep close tabs on the flock in “Protestant England”, but it was soon realised by the priests and chaplains on the ground that more was needed.

Clergy organised social activities which provided an ‘alcohol free’ environment and thus attractive to women in the community. Many other clergy got involved in community groups such as housing associations and hostels. Chaplains went into the field to support migrant men working on motorway construction projects and they performed other supportive roles such as letter writing to the families back home. The large concentration of Irish in places such as Kilburn allowed people to meet and exchange information on Sundays at masses.

The Irish have a great oral tradition and this was and still is reflected in the way information is exchanged around the community. The Irish public house was an important place for Irishmen in particular. While the aspects of drinking and socialising are well documented, the pub allowed people to maintain links with fellow Irishmen and exchange ideas and information. It has often been commented

that such famous hostelrys such as the Crown and the Archway Tavern were not just pubs but labour exchanges also where men could pick up work. These public houses also provided lodging and many cashed cheques as most people were without a bank account.

Irish dance halls also provided informal platforms for information to be shared. By the late 1960s there were over twenty of these establishments with the Galtymore in Cricklewood and the Buffalo in Camden Town providing focal points for the community. These cultural centres may have passed into history but they left their mark on the community as it struggled to assimilate to mainstream British society. They demonstrate how cultural capital sustained a natural information resource.

Official government bodies: Since 1950 the embassy of the Republic of Ireland has been located in Westminster. In addition to its normal diplomatic function it has an iconic status due to the large number of Irish in the country and their unique legal status. The embassy provides assistance in areas such as passport queries and birth certificate information. The embassy also gives advice to people who are retiring or considering moving home to Ireland after a long period of time. The embassy serves as a bridge between the Irish government and organisations that are dedicated to helping meet the needs of the Irish migrant.

The Dion group was set up by the Irish government (Dion is the Irish word for shelter) to address the concerns of the Irish community in Britain. The committee has given much financial support to voluntary agencies that provide advice and welfare services, which need to be accessed by vulnerable migrants. This constitutes a wide spectrum of services such as health and housing entitlements, social welfare and employment, which promotes social inclusion.

The Federation of Irish Societies (FIS) was set up in 1973 as an informal umbrella organisation for existing Irish clubs and societies to assist them in finding accommodation and giving business advice. It set up the community care network and was a major force in setting up associations such as the Irish Housing Association to deal with the needs of the most disadvantaged members of the community. The FIS is non-political but has had formal meetings with the Irish Government since the early 1980. Quarterly meetings are

held with the Irish Ambassador on matters relating to the Irish in Britain. There has been increased contact with the British Government in recent times and the FIS attends meetings of the British-Irish parliamentary assembly. There has been representation at the Home Office Relations Forum, which has stimulated political involvement and helped to raise the plight of so many migrants in Britain. The inclusion of the Irish as a separate ethnic group in regard to the census, for instance, will only help to generate more statistical data for research purposes. The FIS is active right across the UK and is involved in all aspects of Irish life in London whether social, cultural or as a service provider.

Local government services also provide services for all aspects of elderly migrant life. Camden library service has an extensive local history collection with a range of sources which reflect the Irish community in the Borough. While the library service has an important part to play in migrant life it plays less of a special role in the Irish community. Local government services utilised by the Irish migrants tend to be more health or benefit based. Ealing council provides an age concern service: the Irish Advice Service. Its drop-in centre covers such issues as benefits housing, personal care and returning to Ireland.

Housing associations and accommodation provision: The provision of housing is one of the greatest concerns for Irish migrants. Community-based action has developed. The Inisfree Housing Association was founded in 1985 in Brent with the goal of improving health and housing conditions. At present it owns over 500 properties over North and North West London. The association catered primarily for Irish migrants but is open to any ethnic group. Furthermore, it has been involved in strategic alliances with other housing associations such as the Solomon project. This project, which commenced in 1998, consists of a loose gathering of housing associations, which allow it to pool resources and share information. Other housing associations that have an Irish focus are the Cara Housing Association and An Teach Association, which are based in Haringey.

Arlington House in Camden is a hostel which caters for migrant needs. It was opened at the turn of the last century and was the last of a chain of hostels built by the Victorian philanthropist Lord Rowton. At present, one third of its residents are of Irish extraction.

Information services and charities : The London Irish Centre is one of the oldest of its type set up in 1955 by a committee led by Father Tom McNamara. The committee had the foresight to purchase premises in Camden Square where it remains today. The primary aims of the centre were to form a social service bureau to give advice, to keep a register of approved lodgings for both men and women and to provide a hall for social and recreational functions. Today the centre has three large halls with catering facilities, a fully staffed advice and information centre. The bulk of the current case workload has to do with accommodation for long-term migrants but there is also a focus on welfare benefits and employment issues. The centre is also involved in community work through its outreach programme, which caters for older migrants in North London (Kilburn, Camden and Islington). The aim of this service is to be pro-active and to bring information and education to people who may be unable to find it. The service deals with people's access to health care and social opportunities, along with such issues as adequate lodgings and income.

The centre meets a wide variety of social needs with emphasis on traditional Irish music and dancing as well as providing educational courses in the Irish language. It also holds a book club and the London Irish theatre is attached to it. The centre has strong links to other Irish organisations such as the GAA and housing associations, so that information needs can be tackled in a coordinated way

The Irish Support and Advice Service is based in Hammersmith and performs a similar function to its sister centre in Camden. It has a large focus on the needs of the long-term Irish migrant in Britain and has currently two pension groups in Ealing and Hammersmith, which help consolidate social networks by providing support and activities. The ISAS promotes its advice services with a drop in clinic three times a week in Hammersmith and once a week in Ealing, covering how to claim a pension, obtain housing benefit to help pay rent, seek sheltered accommodation and make referrals for counselling, employment allowance and community care grants. The service also provides advice on returning to Ireland and how to obtain an Irish pension, birth certificate or passport. There is also an outreach service, which involves one to one home visits. This is designed for people with poor health or disability who would not be able to come to the drop in clinic. The service the ISAS provides has a high demand and at the present time is processing over a thousand enquiries a year.

The London Irish Women's Centre was set up in 1983 to cater for the needs of Irish migrant women. Situated in Stoke Newington, it provides a variety of services for women of all walks of Irish life, particularly those who are disadvantaged such as Irish traveller women. The organisation provides a wide range of services designed to meet the needs of women such as information on the National Health Service, education providers, cultural and social events, housing applications, homelessness debt issues or disability allowances. In addition, the centre also has a small library with Internet access and offers services such as photocopying or printing facilities at a reduced rate.

The London Irish Women's Centre also liaises with the Immigrant Counselling And Psychotherapy (ICAP) to aid its clients. This is an organisation that deals with migrants of all backgrounds but has a focus on the needs of Irish women. It is attached to the centre and receives funding from the Irish government. As a charity it provides culturally sensitive counselling and psychotherapy to members of migrant backgrounds. ICAP specialises in dealing with people of Irish backgrounds who may be vulnerable and have suffered various forms of mental health issues or abuse. It has a project running in Islington to create awareness of Irish groups in and around the borough. It provides information on healthy living and ways to socialise, and is a valuable service as the stigma of mental health issues is very prevalent in the Irish community

Brent Irish Advice Service provides a valuable service for pensioners. It was set up in the late 1970s and is run by volunteers as a community and welfare organisation. This organisation provides many general services such as information on freedom passes for public transport, pension credits either British or Irish and other general advice. There are currently two projects running: one provides a welcoming environment where people of Irish descent can take part in social activities and information sessions. The other is a transition to old age project. The object of these projects is to deliver information in a culturally sensitive way so the migrant feels at ease.

There are many organisations operating in London, which help migrants who may have slipped through the cracks of society. One such organisation is Cricklewood Age Concern. Operating in North London since its inception in 1983 it is open to all people whatever their ethnic origin but has a strong link to the Irish community. One of the main objectives of

this group is to re-integrate people back into society. It offers a wide range of services such as the most basic requirement of providing clean clothing and hot food, to more sustained activities such as offering support and direction for education and job prospects. The organisation works in close contact with the borough along with other agencies such as Homeless London and Housing Justice.

The Aisling Project is a registered charity, which is dedicated to reaching out to long-term Irish migrants who feel vulnerable and isolated. It also specialises in providing support for migrants who long to go and see their homeland again and it also supports long-term migrants reconnect with family and friends. The project has expanded greatly over the last 12 years and it makes it one of its primary aims to get in touch with as many Irish migrants as it possibly can. The project is completely run by volunteers who have experience in dealing with issues such as healthcare, alcohol dependency and homelessness. This project is also attached to Arlington House.

Cultural organisations: The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) has a strong London presence. The organisation became prominent in the heyday of migration in the 1960s with clubs scattered right across the U.K. It was particularly important in London as the city has its own team and enters in competition at levels with other competing counties in Ireland. The GAA provided much-needed cultural support to migrants and was particularly important during testing times such as during repeated bombing campaigns in the 1970s. It provides a platform where immigrants from all areas of Irish life can mingle while giving them a sense of belonging. This greatly aids the information transfer role of the GAA. There are numerous local GAA centres scattered throughout the city, but are most common in traditional Irish areas such as the North and North West of London with the main stadium situated in Ruislip.

The London Irish Centre was established in 1995 in Hammersmith and received generous Irish government funding since its inception. The centre does similar work to the Irish Centre in Camden but there is much more emphasis on the social aspect of migrant life. The centre runs weekly programme featuring Ireland's best traditional and contemporary musicians, Irish literary events such as story telling and poetry nights. There is a dedicated elder programme, which provides social space for migrants to meet and mingle in a secure

environment. There are also twice-monthly tea dance and reminiscence groups to allow migrants to share experiences and memories. The centre also has an emphasis on adult education with subjects offered such as Irish language, cultural studies and a variety of Irish music and dance classes. The David Whiteley library is Britain's only public library specialising in fiction and non-fiction Irish books. The collection has grown throughout the years and now stands at a total of 3500 items and is a valuable information repository.

Other organisations that operate in this field are the County Associations, which allow people from the same county to mingle and socialise. They were a strong forum for migrants to meet in the early days of migration with all twenty-six counties of the Republic or Ireland being represented. Today, some exist in name only but the Sligo, Mayo and Tipperary associations still maintain memberships. Other groups which help propel Irish culture and way of life are the London Irish Theatre, Southwark Irish Cultural Arts and Development Centre, and the London Irish Network.

The media: The *Irish Post* was set up in 1970 to address the information needs of migrants throughout the U.K. by keeping them informed of events and services in their area. It has provided a source of news from Ireland, which is often ignored in British media circles. To an extent the WWW has superseded it for coverage but it is still highly regarded as an important information source for the elderly in Britain.

The *Irish World* is another paper, which generates information for the Irish community. It began in 1990 and provides much the same function as its rival paper. However it is considered much more London based and the fact that it arrived later than its rival has contributed to it having a lower readership particularly among the older demographic. Both of these papers are published weekly.

The national and regional Irish newspapers are widely available throughout London and provide migrants with news from home. The regional papers tend to have strong readerships with migrants still having a strong bond with their places of origin. In the past it was not uncommon for relatives or friends in Ireland to post local papers to migrants so that they felt in touch with life at home.

The national broadcaster in Ireland (RTE) provided a radio service, which was available in London on Longwave Radio Atlantic 252. It provided a valuable information source for

people in London. This was particularly true for GAA matches as many people eagerly anticipated the commentary. Unfortunately this service ceased in 2008 to be replaced by a digital service, which most migrants are unaware of and unable to access. RTE television is widely screened in most Irish public Houses and keeps people up to date with news generated by Irish media services.

Interviews with representatives of

organisations: Five people familiar with the organizational environment were identified and interviewed. The former chair of the Federation of Irish Societies (FIS) noted that many social taboos still exist today, and these are barriers to successful information transfer. General and mental health can still be a problem area. Alcohol abuse is associated with depression and a feeling of isolation, generating a sense of shame among certain quarters of migrants and a perceived failure to have a successful migration experience. There is a reluctance to seek help from their adopted homeland. With increasing age the problem may be magnified as their social networks and resources degrade.

The Deputy Head of the Social Policy Research Centre at Middlesex University has conducted extensive research into the migration paths of Irish women coming to London. Her research focuses on the lives of Irish nurses who were a significant groups in the National Health Service at the end of the 1960s. Their experiences were different to the men and this has been overlooked. She commented that a lot of these nurses who never married had lived in hospital accommodation and when faced with retirement had to seek new homes. This can be a traumatic experience as their support network of friends is also lost. Some nurses who managed to settle and have families married fellow Irishmen, as marrying outside the community (a process known as 'othering') was frowned upon. This brought fresh problems due to the lifestyles of some (but not all) Irish men. Alcoholism and absenteeism from the home were common, and while separation and divorce was much more acceptable in the UK than Ireland, many marriages were based on the core Irish belief that only a death could end a marriage. This circle of domestic strife and difficult family life left a mark on many women and it is evident that mental health services must be culturally tapered to respond to women in such situations.

An organizer of the Irish Network of Great Britain was interviewed. His organisation has been aimed at the younger migrant. It is his view that the process of erosion of the

community has been intensifying since the 1980s due to different employment practices, and changing lifestyles, and it has accelerated rapidly since 2000. He attributes this to the fact that the majority of Irish would have emigrated in their late teens and that they are approaching retirement as a cohort. Senior citizenship is bringing them to encounter problems and conditions their experience has not necessarily equipped them for.

A worker at the Cricklewood Homeless Concern was interviewed. This organisation is not exclusively involved with Irish migrants but its origins lay in this community. This area of London has long been associated with the Irish community and the worker and his colleagues are in an excellent position to judge what is happening on the ground with regard to the Irish community. He has observed that there has been a marked increase in the number of homeless elderly Irish in the last decade. While there has always been some cases of homelessness, he attributes this to retirement and the loss of income and status. Many live in private rented accommodation so become vulnerable. Problems of mental health issues, social isolation and alcoholism come easily to the fore. He also notes the pride that some of these men have and the sheer embarrassment that many have in asking for assistance. The organisation he represents has done much work to highlight the problem but more needs to be done. In his own words "*prevention is better than cure*" and the emphasis must be on creating awareness of the services and help that these members of society are entitled to while consolidating and expanding existing services.

A staff member at the *Irish Post* was interviewed and observed that the paper has witnessed a steady fall in circulation figures for a considerable length of time. The readership reflects the aging population whilst the younger people of the community are searching the Internet for their information needs. However, he was quick to point out that the *Irish Post* still provides a valuable information resource to its readership. Moving to a digital platform would be a solution but in so doing it could alienate the older community and also hurt circulation figures. He is correct in his assessment that the paper performs an admirable role in creating awareness of issues in the Irish community and also in providing information services and events that may aid an immigrant way of life. The *Irish Post* is one of the key components in communicating a message to the long-term migrants.

Discussion of findings from the information

audit: The first is that there are many organisations working on behalf of migrants which encompass all strands of Irish life in London. The historical size of the community has made this possible and the community as a whole is vibrant, thriving, and equal to any ethnic group, which makes up the demography of London. There is also an awakening in circles that some sectors of the community and particularly the elderly have been caught in a "time warp" and have been left behind. The efforts of organisations, clubs, social services and studies in the field of academia are all contributing to combat the problem. There is a great deal of co-operation between service providers with facilities and resources being pooled together to achieve maximum effectiveness. Many of these service providers, which tackle the needs of the Irish, employ staff of Irish backgrounds. This can help break down barriers as long-term migrants feel much more comfortable with somebody who understands their culture.

However there are still major challenges to face by information providers in helping the delivery of services that migrants should be entitled to. The community is aware to some degree of the services that are available but they are not always being accessed. The audit highlights the need to deliver the message in an effective way. There has been a major push from all sectors of society to incorporate more and more of everyday information needs in a digital form. This can be seen as an evolution for all communities, but the long-term Irish migrants there are still enormous difficulties in adapting to this. Therefore traditional and older methods of delivering information must be maintained in an attempt to keep as many of this community from falling into a state of "information paralysis".

The Peoples voice

Interviews with information users: These took place between the 22nd of November and the 18 December 2010. Six interviewees were known personally to the author and a process of snowballing was used to gain nine more participants. Biernacki and Waldorf (1981) indicate snowballing is a common sense approach if the research is sensitive or the population is dispersed. The interviews were conducted in venues chosen by the interviewees (Acton, Shepherds Bush and Kilburn). Eight of the interviews took place at the home of the interviewee, four were conducted in a social club and three in coffee shops. The questions were open ended way. A Dictaphone was used to record the interviews and notes were taken.

The interviews were conducted in a professional and friendly manner with all subjects willing to discuss their views and the problems they were encountering. Certain subjects that were uncomfortable for people to talk about such as present family conditions and health issues were avoided. Each interview was planned to run between forty-five and sixty minutes but some interviewees were willing to extend.

The characteristics of the group: Eight men and seven women took part. All participants arrived in Britain in the main period of mass migration with the earliest arrival coming in 1951 and the latest in 1973. The ages varied from sixty-three years of age (the youngest) to eighty-four (the oldest) . Nine came from a rural agricultural background and six from a town or urban setting. All except one (from Northern Ireland) were from the Republic of Ireland and all were Roman Catholic by birth. Family situation varied and can be best illustrated by the table below:

Status	Male	Female
Married	1	2
Divorced /separated	3	0
Widowed	1	5
Single	3	0

All the women interviewed had been married. All of the men interviewed had worked at some stage in the construction industry and as subject D states

"I was always away from home working and then in the pub, it was the culture of the time. A lot of men neglected our families and now we are on our own"

The subjects that were married by and large did so from within the community but once again, women tended to have broader horizons with two women marrying outside the community. These two cases in particular had strong views as both married outside their Roman Catholic faith. This was known as a process of 'othering' and was frowned upon socially in the past. The opposition to marrying a British Protestant was obvious but subject B's partner was Greek Cypriot in origin and as she explained.

"It was difficult to explain my choice to my friends here in London, but it was impossible to explain to members of family back home, none of them had any idea where Cyprus was"

Of the twelve subjects who married, all had children. The size of family was between four and nine, in line with typically Irish families of the time. The entire sample had contact with the children but this tended to be stronger with the female subjects as in a traditional Irish family, where the mother takes the lead with parental duties. The fact that there was a high degree of absenteeism among Irishmen also tends to damage relationships as children reach adulthood. It can be advantageous for migrants to have good relations, as offspring will be able to aid their parents with their information needs. This can be as basic as searching the Internet for service or just helping in filling out official application forms, which some elderly people may find difficult. It must be pointed out that there is a lot of evidence to back up the claim that many Irish men did adjust to family life and had a long and successful career and home life.

Education: One of the vehicles of assimilation is the standard of education that a migrant receives in their home country along with their learning experiences in the host country. The system of education in Ireland was and still is very similar to the system used in the U.K. But there was one major difference in this group: the men migrating were products of the new Irish nation, and this shaped their education experience. The provision of teaching in the Irish language and a rather slanted view of Irish history was to shape many peoples' minds in this time. There was also the fact that the Irish state in many cases left the provision of education in the hands of religious orders such as the Christian Brothers. This educational experience would not always be the best preparation for migration to Britain. However, it became obvious from discussion that the experience of men and women were very different.

This can be attributed to many factors, but the primary one is the level of education they received. Of the men interviewed only one had gone onto secondary level and then only for two years. The cost of secondary education in Ireland at this time would have been beyond the reach of many families

The opportunities for men to continue to learn formally in Britain were rarely considered among this group. Many men picked up valuable skills when working in their chosen industry but these were learned on site and in a haphazard nature. The lack of formal education meant that many men stayed in positions of employment that offered little progression. Academic ability was not required to progress in many of the construction firms. Physical strength was always more important. This lack of education has led to many men now living blinkered lives, with many freely admitting they would avoid a situation if they felt they were not in control. Their lack of knowledge of subject matter has also served to impoverish. As subject G states *"I left school at fourteen and the prospect of some stranger looking at my handwriting is very off-putting."*

The women tended to stay a school a bit longer with five having gone as far as intermediate certificate level (this in British educational standard today would be GCSE level). The remaining two women describe their secondary level education as intermittent due to family concerns such as helping out with family. The eldest sister would be expected to help with some domestic duties for instance. Five of the seven women who participated in this study began their career in the health profession with the other two women employed in the hospitality sector. Those employed as nurses enjoyed much better education due to their chosen profession. Nursing, for many young Irish women at the time was seen as a good career; this was less the case with native British women who did not see it this way. The formal learning experience gave these women a sense of discipline and helped them nurture the desire for education experiences in their offspring. It was also significant that four of the sample when questioned had been active in some form of adult education or belonged to a public library. This however, was as much a social need as a learning need as many of these women used it as an opportunity to engage with their peers in the community.

Experiences on arrival: There was no surprise to find that both the men and the women in the group all left their homeland for better employment opportunities after hearing about the bright lights of London and other major cities. However one of the men (Subject G) left because of institutional abuse as a child in Ireland. While this is well known in Ireland today, it was a taboo subject in the past and the interviewer felt uncomfortable discussing it with a stranger.

The common need for every person was for social contact. Migration by its very nature involves a number of deep, traumatic experiences, apprehension and a sense of venturing into the unknown with naturally heightened anxieties (Castles and Miller, 2003). This can be lessened by the knowledge that friendly faces were waiting for their arrival (all but three of the subjects immigrated with the knowledge that a friend or relative had arranged some form of accommodation). The three who lacked a prior contact were all men who had migrated in a haphazard way. It is of no surprise that the primary aim of all migrants concerned in this study was to “settle in” and form relationships. There was also the misconception among the majority that this migration would be temporary and they would return to their places of birth one day. Time was to tell a different story. There was also the apprehension of parents that their young would be unable to function in a “godless society” such as Britain. Subject F’s account of leaving home and arriving in London best explains it:

“I was nurse in the Royal Brompton and shared my room with two girls from Co. Clare. While the initial shock of arriving in England was almost too much it became obvious that we had much more freedom than we could ever had back home. We were earning our own money and could explore one of the great cities of the world without wondering what the neighbours would think. We had a freedom to do what we liked which our counterparts in Ireland could only dream of.”

The men tended to have more freedom to leave due to less parental control but also to ease the pressure on household budgets, which were tight. As subject C explained:

“I left school in Limerick in the earlier 1950s. The only work that was available to me as a thirteen-year-old was a telegraph boy. On my sixteenth birthday I was too old to do this, as the pay didn’t reflect my age. While my mother did not want me to go there was no choice as I was the oldest of seven and one less mouth to feed.”

While there was a huge degree of homesickness, it quickly became apparent that many of these young people could have experiences that they would never have been able to have in Ireland. The experiences of living in a more liberated society where one was earning a good wage clouded some migrant’s judgement that these times would last. This was an error on their part and has implicated on their information needs today as this prosperous aspiration has been eroded by events.

Discrimination: It is important to discuss this issue as it still resonates in certain areas of the Irish community. The mass influx of migrants into the UK in the post war period has been widely and extensively researched (Dickens and McKnight, 2008; Hickman, 1997; Hickman, 1998). Many urban centres such as London experienced areas being transformed into ghetto areas for migrant communities. This led to racial tension with the native population with instances of violence a common occurrence such as the Notting Hill Riots of 1958 which involved the Caribbean community. The Irish migrants were not exempt from this experience even though they shared a common language and skin colour with the host group. The fact that the Irish were a different branch of the Christian faith did add to this volatile mix. All migrants who were interviewed experienced some form of discrimination but it was much more pronounced with males. The males were viewed as units of labour and as subject A summed up *“We were paid to shovel and dig not to think. We were paid from the shoulders down.”*

The experience of having only a basic education and growing up in agrarian society left many unprepared for the hustle and bustle of urban British life. This in turn led to an inward view of looking to one community for support, friendship and all aspects of day-to-day life. These factors aggravated the sense of discrimination and injustice, which gave the community something of a siege mentality.

This view is widely held among the men interviewed but some to a varying degree. Some look back and explain that a form of discrimination came from their fellow Irish brethren. Many of the subjects interviewed admitted that they had difficulty in gaining employment particularly in the area of construction. As subject I put it:

“If you got a British foreman he would treat you alright. Some Irish foreman was very clannish and wanted to know what county you came from and how much you could drink.”

Irish women were not exempt from this stereotyping either and many suffered in their positions of employment. Four of the women interviewed came as trainee nurses and while all said that a lot of their experiences were pleasant, the overall consensus was that there was a high level of tolerance for an Irish stereotype. It had to be treated as harmless banter as subject K states, even if there was a negative underlay:

“They loved Irish nurses. They really did. Irish nurses were always kind of looked up to; you know I suppose it is the charm and sensitivities”

Thus, for many of the women who migrated, their relationship to Irish ethnic identity was mediated by their gender and professional status. Their experiences were largely more positive than the men's. Irish nurses had a much more positive stereotype in strong contrast to almost all other Irish people in Britain in the period between 1950- 1970 (Ryan, 2007).

However there were also accounts of blatant forms of discrimination, stereotyping and prejudice. The fact that most women did not perceive this as anti-Irish racism suggests that they perceived this behaviour as acceptable. Subject J was recruited to a prestigious London hospital and found few Irish nurses on the staff; there was open hostility towards them based on the stereotypes of dirtiness, fecklessness and backwardness. In her own words'

“The sisters were really snappy with us. Say for instance, you didn't clean down the top of the locker they would say, “oh there's the Irish again. I'll show you this is how to clean a thing”. As if we weren't clean. The English would say’ “didn't your mother teach you better than that?””

These experiences encountered a considerable time ago, still have a bearing on the mind-set of long-term migrants, which have implications for information needs. This has evolved particularly when these migrants started to have families of their own, in a period which coincided with the IRA campaign of violence on the British mainland from the early 1970s. This shaped the mind-set of many migrants, as they felt ashamed and bitter of their nationality due to the violence being inflicted in their name. As subject C put it.

“There were some good Englishmen that I worked and drank with. It was very difficult to meet them on a Monday morning and looked them in the eye if a bomb had gone off. My sense of guilt was enormous and it made me more aware of staying in my own crowd”

It can be said that all of the experiences discussed, this drove many migrants to the very edge of society and this still has impact on information needs today.

Information Access: Networking Word of

mouth: This is by far one of the most crucial aspects of Irish migrant life in Britain today (e.g. Granovetter, 1973; Olden, 1999; Oakley, 1992; Orsi, 2002). This study can conclude that this is still the most effective mechanism for disseminating information to elderly migrants. The sound of one accent can start numerous conversations and can be a real icebreaker for many purposes. For instance, during this process any subject who had not met the interviewer asked what county he was from. This has not changed in the post-war period either. Traditionally, this was of major importance to men in search of employment but now it is equally important to maintaining relationships with one's peers or to search for information that may be of importance to the migrant. The information gathering process in this case is initiated through informal channels comprising of family friends and former work colleagues. In the sample interviewed, there was an interesting difference between the genders. While all had some social contact with their peers, the mediums and locations differed. The men still tended to congregate in public houses or betting offices to discuss things while the women used more orthodox methods such as church or social club settings.

The major drawback of this form of communication is that while the information may be of benefit, there may be more important information that could not be divulged. For instance the interviewer was aware of the sensitivity of the subject of health or housing services. Many of the subjects freely admitted to being uncomfortable discussing such topics due to factors such as pride or embarrassment. As subject E stated;

“The idea of speaking about personal problems with a total stranger would make me very uneasy and I would do my best to avoid it. I would not like the lads to know any of my problems like that.”

Information centres: All subjects interviewed were aware of a service that was designed to meet their specific information needs. The most popular one was the Irish Cultural Centre in Hammersmith, as all the migrants interviewed lived close to this area. The whole sample was aware of the social facilities available to them such as the coffee shop, library and function room. However, it was clear that there was a good deal of ignorance when asked about services that other organisations were offering. The ISAS service is based in the centre and while there was some awareness of the organisation, it was unclear among men what exactly this organisation did and how it might be able to help them. Subject E stated :

“as far as I am was concerned it was just a group for very old people and I am not ready to join something like that.”

It is therefore apparent that information services such as the one stated above are heavily reliant on word-of-mouth communication. The message clearly is not being delivered as to what services are available. None of the subjects in the sample could recall an advertisement campaign by any organisation to promote Irish needs. The traditional outlets creating awareness, such as churches, have broken down as many men admitted that they no longer attend church. This is not the case with women who tended to have a stronger religious faith and would observe advertisements on church notice boards for instance. There was also a strong tendency among the community not to use specialised services, which are targeted at the community.

Most of the sample had some dealings with local councils or agencies such as job centres as they did feel some sense of assimilation and felt no different to their British counterparts.

There was however, a degree of frustration as many had the view that these organisations did not see any ethnic difference. There was also the view that the stereotypical view of the Irish community was negative as subject H stated:

“I had an interview one day with somebody in the job centre about my benefit entitlements. The person in question looked and spoke to me as if I was just another failure who had lived an irresponsible life I found the whole experience very humiliating.”

The deployment of information rights throughout the community must be more culturally informed so that many people are brought into the net. The use of Irish organisations as a medium between migrant and establishment must be broadened as a member of the Irish community working on behalf of an Irish migrant will understand their needs better. This can be as easy as pronouncing an Irish name or surname correctly so that the person that is at the heart of the issue feels they are engaged in the process, as this gives them a sense of control over proceedings.

The media: The sample used various forms of media to meet their information needs. Mainstream British newspapers were all read by the sample but with no distinct pattern. It was interesting to note that while daily Irish newspapers were available in London, most only read them occasionally and only if a friend or colleague had bought one. This can be attributed to the fact that on arrival the Irish newspapers would have been printed a day later in London and therefore the news would have been out of date. The fact that there was no language barrier made it as easy to consume British journalism. The situation became a little more complex when asked about Irish regional papers. Many of the migrants from rural backgrounds still purchased their local paper. The reason for this was an emotional link to their origins.

Television and radio were also accessed with the main terrestrial stations being utilised. No subjects interviewed had access to satellite TV or digital radio. The main programmes watched were of a current affairs nature or sport. There was a degree of sadness that RTE radio was no longer available on the long wave band as many migrants used this service for news from Ireland and to listen to commentary of GAA matches. This service was replaced by a digital service which none of the interviewed migrants were able to access.

None of the respondents had direct access to the Internet. This was of no surprise as many migrants stated who they would not know how to use it. Some of the migrants did state that they had got family or friends to access information on the Internet such as booking trips to Ireland or searching for social events, however, no subjects said they would use it to search for news.

Present information issues: Health

provision: The sample interviewed had no issues with disabilities and were fully mobile. Some did discuss friends that were disabled or housebound and found the provision of healthcare adequate with regular visits by outreach workers from various organisations including the NHS. The provision of such things as mobility scooters or transport to hospital for appointments was also mentioned.

All subjects had registered with a GP and all had a national insurance number. Almost all of the men stated they would only go for medical advice if they were ill with flu or had injured a limb. The men seemed apprehensive of the health service, as they were nervous that other ailments such as mental health issues or levels of drinking would be discussed. As subject D stated

“Once I injured my hip and went to my local surgery. My regular GP was away and when the doctor I saw discovered I was Irish, the first question he asked was. How much do you drink?”

This attitude may not be widespread, but instances of this may impinge the community as their reliance on word of mouth communication spreads the message! It is important therefore that other benefits to older migrants such as the flu inoculation and a free health check for members over 65 are known about and accessed on the NHS. The provision of mental health services was discussed with the entire sample, however this did cause unease in the subjects and the researcher decided not to pursue this line of questioning (Commander, et al., 1999).

The women of the sample seem to be more aware of what health benefits they are entitled to and this may come from the fact that many of them were in employed in the medical sector and were eager to discuss the fact that they had used such service.

Employment and Retirement: All the women interviewed had reached retirement age and were no longer economically active. They all received state pensions from the UK authorities and two subjects also had invested in private pension plans. Three of the subjects also had pension entitlements in Ireland and these were paid directly into their UK bank accounts. While the question was not directly asked, the impression was given that the subjects in question were all financially secure in their retirement years.

The situation with the men was different as three of them were still working. Two were still involved in construction while one was self-employed as a market trader. There was a sense of confusion in relation to pension entitlements as they were not sure of what they were entitled to (Morris,2001). The subject employed as a market trader had kept accurate records of his employment history and also completed his self-assessment tax returns every year. The men employed in the construction sector were not as fortunate and felt uncomfortable discussing it as subject I states:

“I am not sure what I will do when I retire because I have no idea what I have actually paid into the system. I just hope that I have something to show for my efforts.”

The five remaining men had reached retirement age and their experiences were mixed. Two were receiving a state pension while the other three were receiving a partial pension. Not one of them had any private pension plan and were facing genuine financial hardship. There was a huge degree of shame in relation to this, and when the interviewer touched on the subject on sourcing information on this area, the interviewee stalled. Many of the subjects were aware of the services that are available to them but felt uncomfortable searching them out. This can be attributed to a mixture of pride, embarrassment and a genuine feeling that they cannot be helped.

Housing: The housing situation was also a mixed picture, as illustrated in the Table:

Type of accommodation	Male	Female
Owned by occupant	0	3
Council accommodation	3	1
Privately rented	4	0
Housing association	1	2
Sheltered housing	0	1

The female respondents again seem to show a degree of stability in their lives with almost half owning or part owning their dwelling. This has added security for them in their twilight years. Their information needs are met in this aspect of their life. In some ways this is a measure of migration success.

The situation with the male participants was much different with half the group living in private rented accommodation. It was interesting to note that of the seven men living in some form of rented accommodation, many had lived there since they arrived. Of the three single men living in a privately rented flat or bedsit, two of them said that they had not lived anywhere else since they arrived in this country. Subject E stated, that their central heating did not work properly and the landlords reaction was one of indifference. However when asked why would he not consider other forms of accommodation the reaction was:

“I have lived here all my adult life here and I would find it impossible to live anywhere else.”

The attitude was that their accommodation was suitable and that they did not need information about alternative forms. There were some positives as the four men were all aware of their benefits in relation to housing and all were receiving some form of rent allowance. The subjects in council accommodation also seemed to be long-term residents.

Involvement with community and peers:

All of the groups said they all took some active part in the community and had frequent contact with friends. This is important, as explained earlier in the chapter in regards to the reliance on word of mouth. Male social lives tended to revolve around such places as the local public houses and betting offices. As most of the sample was retired or close to retirement, this was their only method of human interaction with friends. None of the men stated that they had got involved in any of the events that the Irish centres were providing, except for one who abstained from alcohol. Drinking in the community was still seen as important to men even though most were aware that it was detrimental to their mental and physical health. There did not seem to be much change in the habits of men as when asked about events such as Saint Patrick's Day or All Ireland Final Day (the equivalent of the FA Cup final for GAA matches) it was stated that the public house was the focus of all social activity.

It was also interesting to note that many men tended to frequent the same establishment every day.

The women in the sample had different socialising habits. As stated earlier, many of the females were still regular churchgoers with most participating in their local church excursions for instance. Some also had interests, which consisted of hobbies such as bingo, or playing bridge, and this allowed some social interaction. Subject M was an excellent source of information about Irish female migrants. She ran an informal social club with her friends and through personal contact with the researcher it was possible to interview many female subjects. This club in Shepherds Bush met twice weekly and all agreed that it was a very significant part of their lives. Subject M stated that without this club many of the group (it also included some men but not many) would be completely isolated except for family ties. The women also tended to visit the library to read socially, with four of the sample claiming to be members of their local library.

Contact with family and home: There was considerable informal contact with family members both in the UK and in Ireland. Contact with family members in Ireland has improved through the years as telephone communication improved. The entire sample has a relative or friend in Ireland. The research showed that no subjects wrote a letter to family in Ireland: the telephone has replaced this traditional means of communication. The entire sample, including the three men who had no family of their own, was regularly in contact with family. The importance of a landline was stressed among the group and one of the major complaints was the cost of making an overseas call. Eleven of the sample also had a mobile phone but most said they only used them to receive calls in order for family to stay in touch. Some also liked the idea that if they were to have an accident, they could to contact a family member immediately. Of the sample interviewed who had children, all were 'empty nesters' but had regular contact with their children and grandchildren. Most migrants received their families rather than travelled to them. The reason for this can be that most people in this demographic may not feel comfortable travelling out of the local area.

Many of the migrants confessed that having family was very helpful in meeting their information needs as the offspring of these migrants were more aware of how to access services and meet information needs. This was true across the genders.

Discussion and analysis: The Irish community has been slow to embrace the changing environment that now surrounds them. There is an awareness of services that are coming on line and there is also a realisation by the migrant that these services are required. It is obvious that there is still an over reliance on traditional methods of communication and support. These have served the community well in the past but as the migrants get older and frailer, more needs to be done. Nicholas (2000) in his research found that the future is not just about information sharing and distribution, but instead about getting closer to what people need in the way of information and how it is to be packaged for the individual at a particular time and place of choice. This involves understanding what difficulties and problems the users experience in order to help them overcome these barriers.

The female participants in this group have been shown to be more progressive in dealing with their information needs and also show some degree of willingness to utilise these services. However, there does seem to be a huge resistance to change from the male demographic. This has its origins in many factors, which have been discussed here, but as more and more of these men reach extreme old age, there must be a strategy to meet their information needs. The work of volunteers and family cannot be overlooked but the data shows that many men, in particular are sole dependants and potentially isolated. The challenge for information professionals working with this community must be to change this way of thinking for the better.

Conclusions

This study has necessarily been a local one which has exploited access to a local environment through the contacts and networks of the writer. What about areas other than London? Further study from within bodies engaged in providing information to these migrants may have considerable merit.

The Irish community are still one of the largest migrant communities that exist in the United Kingdom today. There have been many individual successful cases of Irish migrants settling right across the nation and having successful careers and family life. The assimilation process has by and large been relatively smooth, particularly in recent times as Britain has become more multicultural and the political relationship between Great Britain and Ireland has improved.

It must be noted that there is a considerable proportion of this community that have come to be left behind and are living on the margins of society. As the interviews with show, many migrants present lives are still shaped by the experiences they had as younger adults. It is fair to say that during the interview process, the interviewer detected the sense of betrayal and bitterness some of the men in particular felt. The sense of desperation and fact that they are solely dependent on themselves adds to this. The implications of this have direct consequences on all aspects of the migrant's life. The stigma of loneliness isolation and depression must be overcome to help these people in their retirement years.

Many Irish migrants are aware of the services that are available to them but this is only half the battle. There is a historical legacy which reveals migrant's problems of wounded pride, shame and embarrassment in searching for help that must be overcome. This must be done sensibly so that migrants feel that their information needs can be met in a setting they are familiar with and that they feel secure in it. There has to be hope that solutions will be found but they will always require an appreciation of the varied and complex life stories that individual migrants carry with them.

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